

Commensal

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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11th September 1997**Theo Todman****EDITORIAL**

As usual, we start off by welcoming new members to the SIG, so welcome to :-

- Justin Bates
- Sheila Blanchard
- Mr. M. Blumberg
- Paul Cadman
- Rev. L. Cullen
- Mr. T. Flippance
- Mr. A. Hassell
- Mr. R. Kilner
- Mr. Vijai Parhar
- Ivan Parrott

A particular welcome to Paul Cadman, our youngest member (at 14), and welcome back to Sheila Blanchard, who founded the SIG and is a former Mensa SIGs Officer. Also welcome to Ivan Parrott - good to see you at the ISPE picnic the other day !

It was good to hear from Vijai over the 'phone. One point Vijai raised was of the uniformity of the presentation of *Commensal*. He suggested that the alternative method of producing the newsletter - ie. pasting together the contributions as received - does add a variety of presentation and allows some of the personality of the contributors to come through. However, in my view, it does also detract from legibility, produces an ugly mess, and takes longer; but each of us has a different aesthetic sense (I almost found myself agreeing with PLL there !). I could vary the font occasionally, add graphics here & there - any strong views ? When I asked this question in C84, the response, such as it was, seemed to be that format was irrelevant in a philosophical newsletter.

Another point on the conduct of the newsletter - Alan Carr raises the issue of "endless replies". This seemed also to be the case when I first joined the SIG four years or so ago - though then, I seem to remember, we had "out of the blue" replies to articles several issues after they first appeared. Two things here; firstly, the cut and thrust of debate is, in my view, just about the main reason for the existence of the SIG. People write in because they want to hear others' responses to their opinions. However, a long catena of replies is rather difficult to follow, especially for new members, so this must be balanced by new material. Which reminds me; there are a few of you out there whose first thoughts have yet to be heard ! You will note that this issue consists predominately of replies.

While we're on this subject, thanks to Ron Kermode for his suggestion about cross-referencing comments on previous *Commensals*. I've added these



references, hopefully accurately, where the authors have not done so themselves.

Thanks to you all for not going overboard or being discouraged by C87's editorial - there was a flood of post over the couple of weeks following publication, but not on that issue. Those of you who contribute are obviously keen to continue the debates !

I have to admit to a few bloopers in the last edition.

Firstly, there were rather too many typos, in the sense of correctly spelled words out of context. This was due to my scanner & spell-checker being let loose with inadequate quality control from me. Occasionally, this method produces valid but inappropriate words which I have to be extra-diligent to spot. By way of mitigation, could I ask those of you who send me typescripts to use a large font (11pt+) and, where a ribbon is used, use a decent one ? Otherwise my scanner has a difficult time and I end up having to re-type half of the article. This is both extremely tedious and has potentially dire consequences for the sense of the argument. A latest favourite is "nave" instead of "have". C87 saw *modem* appear for *modern* in one of PLL's articles !

Secondly, apologies to Anthony Owens for my curmudgeonly dismissal of his entertaining "Sopha" suggestion for re-naming *Commensal*. Sorry, missed the point completely ! Also, to Rick Street for ill considered remarks about photons.

Thanks to all of you who've contributed to this issue of *Commensal*. As usual, thanks for your patience to those of you who wrote to me some weeks back and have had to await this rather belated C88 to receive a reply. Partly because of a tendency to bloop, partly because I'm always behind schedule and partly because contributions now seem to have reached a critical mass, I had decided to go easy on my own commentary on articles received, except on a selective basis. However, looking back over C88, I do still seem to have written rather a lot.

Finally, the closing date for submissions to the November 1997 edition of *Commensal* is 15th October.

Best wishes,

Theo



15th July 1997

Dave Botting

RESPONSES TO RICK STREET'S CRITICISMS
CONCERNING CANNIBALISM

I would like to take the opportunity to reply to some of the criticisms levelled against my account of cannibalism (**C86, pp. 16-18**) by Rick Street (in **C87, pp. 16-17**). Firstly, Mr. Street says that morality is a social construct and thus, I presume, believes in some sort of historical and/or cultural relativism. The fact that what is considered to be morally right and morally wrong depends on the society in which these value judgements are being made is indisputable and, in fact, trivial. If this was all that relativists believed there would be no arguments. But relativists say that what is considered morally right is morally right and therefore that moral values vary from society to society. In effect the rightness and wrongness of an action depends on the number of people doing it. If this were true then anything that a society did would be justified: the crucifixion of Christ would be justified, being both legal and favoured by the majority. If a society decided they could avert natural disasters by setting fire to everybody from out of town, they would be justified in doing so. If the Germans thought that their society would be better off without four (sic) million Jews, then they would be justified in killing them. Indeed, this is where the collectivism involved in society is at its most pernicious. Prejudices are caused by society, not alleviated by them. If everyone were just treated as individuals then such things as racism would simply never arise. They are not, as is naively thought, the product of a lack of unity, but in fact they are the product of too much. Hitler would never have got as far as he did if he hadn't got thousands of people to believe what he was telling them. In contrast let's take the most extreme example of anti-social behaviour: the actions of mass or serial murderers. The most successful of these have only managed to kill a dozen or so people. In the scale of things this number is insignificant. Serial killers are effete amateurs.

Secondly, I did not advocate vegetarianism for either humans or any other animals. I think meat eating is reasonable (although I would hesitate to call it moral) simply because nature has been designed that way. That is a long way, however, from saying that the life of the lion is in some way more important than the life of the wildebeest, that the life of the human is more important than that of the lion or indeed that the life of the Mensan is more important than the life of the non-Mensan. I was trying to show a correspondence between the sets of cases if intelligence were used as a morally significant dividing line. The argument was that if having greater intelligence makes the human more morally important than the animal then it follows that the vampire/Mensan is more important than the human/non-Mensan. Therefore I decided that intelligence was NOT a morally significant dividing line.

I decided that what was a morally significant dividing line was autonomy, being the ability to think and choose for yourself. The problem here is that



'lower' animals may have more autonomy than is immediately apparent - primates are capable of purposive activity and humans may have less autonomy than is immediately apparent because it is constantly eroded by social pressures. In fact, if Mr. Street were to be followed, people would be reduced to mere extensions of their society and would rather assume the moral status of plants moving involuntarily towards the light.

It is true that one could not get away with eating humans for long. It is also true that to kill a human without causing anybody any pain is more difficult than killing an animal without causing anybody any pain due to the emotional attachments that the human collects. Both of these objections suggest that cannibalism is impractical, but not that it is immoral. Please note: even the autonomous should not cause pain.

Lastly, Mr. Street says that humans are not the only animals to produce art and then goes on to cite several examples of engineering. The difference between art and non-art is not in how it is originated but in how it is evaluated. A nest is a 'good' nest if it provides shelter, attracts a mate etc. A pen in a 'good' pen if the ink that comes from it doesn't smudge or run. In these cases the criteria used are functional and objective. But a painting cannot be adjudged to be good in the same way that a nest or a pen can. It does not have a function in the same way. Its evaluation is purely subjective.

To clear up a final misunderstanding, my name is Dave. Any similarities to persons living or undead are purely coincidental.

Dave Botting

Dave : Thanks for writing in again & revealing your true identity ! I think I agree with most of what you have to say above. Is anyone watching the BBC2 Serial *The Nazis - a Warning from History* ? Do you really mean that the evaluation of art is purely subjective ? Surely, while art has to be viewed in its context, it can be either relevant or irrelevant, well or badly executed, etc ? Having decided what it is the artist is trying to say, is it a purely subjective judgement as to whether or not that objective has been achieved ? Isn't it the case that many aesthetic disagreements arise from using the wrong evaluation criteria ? Similar to evaluating a pen as though it were a sword ?

Theo

14th July 1997

Philip Lloyd Lewis
COMMENTS ON ISSUE 87



Theo Todman (C87, pp. 2-5) : By and large, yes.

Michael Nisbet (C87, p. 5) : What is the "science versus religion controversy" ? Is there only one ?

Anthony Owens (C87, p. 8) : I can't answer the question about objective truths/ reality, as I don't understand it. Is Anthony seriously asserting that "once a physical law is writ", we cannot revise or reject it ? I see no need to "suggest examples" (of physical laws, I take it). Would he like to suggest one or two ?

Rick Street (C87, p. 16) : To say that "we can never know the objective answer" (to a particular question) is to imply that there is an objective answer. For me, there are no objective answers to any questions; in the last analysis, there are only assertions and opinions.

- Rick believes that "there is objective reality" but "can't prove it"; I know that there is objective reality (meaning "reality not created by humans") and feel no need to "prove it".
- Is Rick confusing "objective truth" and "objective reality" ?
- I do not think that Rick is "a figment of my imagination". Some misunderstanding here, it seems.

Theo Todman (C87, p. 21) : If Theo thinks that TTR "denies the very meaning of misuse" (of a philosophy), then he has misunderstood it, but I can't make out how. I find no difficulty in "criticising anyone's world-view", and I am not persuaded that I am acting illogically or inconsistently in so doing.

- We all "build our own subjective worlds", whatever the varying degrees of social restraint, and we cause mayhem by "bumping into other people's worlds" - with or without TTR philosophy.
- There is no objectively "true state of affairs", independent of personal and cultural beliefs.
- The "obviousness" of the "obvious" truth or falsity of any belief is "in the eye of" the believer/non-believer.
- If Theo wishes to regard himself as "an insignificant speck", he is free to do so, but I think he is being unnecessarily modest. I don't regard myself (or him) as "an insignificant speck", nor do I see that as a sign of immodesty. Theo seems to be suffering from a severe form of 'sizeism'. The significance of a person or thing is not determined by size.
- If the "probability of truth" of a statement is assigned a value between 0 and 1 (or in any other way), that assignment is of course subjective. One man's 0.9 is another man's 0.1. If the 0.9-man is a good talker, however, he may be able to persuade the 0.1-man to become a 0.5-man...



- Geometrical theorems are regarded as "true" if mathematicians in general accept the validity of the proof. But modern mathematics has shown that, for example, some of Euclid's proofs lack rigour.

Theo Todman (C87, p. 24) : Words, as units of language, have material aspects (marks on paper, movements of air particles, ear-drum vibrations) and non-material aspects (mental concepts). And so ?

- The word "reality", ultimate or non-ultimate or whatever, implies existence. Similarly, "unreality", however qualified, implies non-existence.
- A person's/culture's "subjective world" is not a "model of reality" - it is that person's/culture's (secondary/subjective) reality. This "subjective world" cannot approximate to different aspects of "objective reality", because primary/ultimate/objective reality has no "aspects" - it simply is (one-and-indivisible).

Rosemary Clarke (C87, p. 28) : Don't give up on us, Rosemary, we need you and people like you - if only to help keep our feet on the ground! My advice would be to concentrate on what you do understand and be sure to get in your penn'orth of comment. In particular, don't be put off by not understanding what TTR is all about - neither does anyone else! (I have difficulties myself, sometimes...)

Philip Lloyd Lewis

Philip : we don't seem to be communicating very well, so maybe it's not a good idea for me to expend much paper trying. There are certain philosophies (such as solipsism, or else the assumption of systematic deception) that are very difficult conclusively to refute, but which, like certain scientific theories, eventually die out for lack of support. I think yours is one of those, but I may be being very unfair because it seems I don't understand it.

I'm willing to go along with the idea that reality is one, and that any way of chopping it up does violence to it. Also, that all scientific theories are provisional and subject to correction. However, I disagree with what I perceive to be your rejection of the scientific enterprise, a cornerstone of which is the act of faith that there is a reality out there that is open to investigation and to which scientific theories ever more closely approximate, albeit with some diversions along the way. I've argued before that there is evidence from the fact that scientific theories make correct predictions that this act of faith is not misplaced. The same cannot be said for other acts of faith. Decision between statements isn't just a matter of persuasive talk. Also, while the standards of mathematical rigour may have improved over



the millennia, mathematical theorems aren't true simply because mathematicians have come to some private agreement.

Theo

June 1997

Philip Lloyd Lewis

SCIENCE AND PSEUDO-SCIENCE

Reprinted from Mensa International Journal, June 1997, p. 7.

The difference between science and pseudoscience is not as clear as Marcos Rodriguez thinks (*IJ Extra*, March). We are all for virtue against vice, for science against pseudoscience, but - as ever - one man's meat is another man's poison.

Let us look at some of the things which science is said to have 'proved'. (Proof, like Beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.)

Has science proved that the Earth is not at the centre of the Universe? No. The Earth is certainly at the centre of the *observable* Universe, in that our telescopes are at the centre of a conceptual sphere whose radius is the (ever-increasing) telescope range.

Has science proved that the Sun does not go around the Earth? No. Galileo and the medieval Church were agreed that the Universe had a fixed centre, so their rival viewpoints were logically incompatible: either the Earth went round the fixed Sun or the Sun went round the fixed Earth. Today we know that the Universe has no objectively fixed point, so we can say, quite logically, that the Sun goes round the Earth (as we see it with our own eyes every day) and that the Earth goes round the Sun (not at all obvious, but this viewpoint simplifies the picture of the solar system and makes orbital calculations much easier). There is no logical conflict today between these two complementary viewpoints, but science will not admit this for fear of losing face to its old ecclesiastical enemy.

Has science proved that the Universe began with a Big Bang? No. This is no more than a theory - and one which has now run into trouble because observations seem to show that some distant stars are older than the calculated "age of the Universe". Has science even proved that the Universe had a beginning? No, and it cannot, because the Universe is necessarily infinite in space and time. All talk about an uncaused First Cause (the Big Bang), with its accompanying "creation of space and time" from Nothing is pure mythology (ie. pseudoscience), the sort of story-telling better left to the religious myth-makers.



It is true that science (or rather, pseudoscience) "has shown us a Universe painfully indifferent to emotional needs", but it is not the proper business of science to make value judgements about the Universe. It is important to remember that we are a part of the Universe and it is our business to attend to "emotional needs". The Universe is as "cold" as we choose to make it.

The greatest failing of (pseudo-)science is its arrogant claim to have objective knowledge about the "true nature" of the Universe. Although the scientific picture of the Universe changes radically from century to century and even from generation to generation, complacent scientists and their acolytes continue to insist that the contemporary picture is objectively correct.

The strength of science, as compared with religion, is or should be that its pronouncements are not sacred; sooner or later, dogmatic scientists fall by the wayside and science moves on to present a new picture of the world, a new paradigm. Scientific advance is not helped by people who treat science as a psychological substitute for religion. The worst enemies of science are those who express the same sort of blind faith in its ephemeral conclusions as their intellectual forebears did in the teachings of religion.

Contemporary science, with its dogmas and its prejudices and its financial dependence on Big Government and Big Business, is too flawed and too corrupt, both ethically and intellectually, to serve as the basis for a valid philosophical world-view.

Mensa International Journal, June 1997

Philip Lloyd Lewis

Philip : well, while not disagreeing with everything you say above, you'll no doubt have anticipated that I'm out of sympathy with its overall tenor ! Yes, scientism is to be shunned. Additionally, scientists should not be adopted as "personalities" to express their opinions on issues outside their spheres of expertise. The leap from scientific theories to overarching philosophical speculation is a tricky one. However, scientific theories of the less speculative sort do place constraints on what is credible. While the leading edge of science may well be heading in the wrong direction at times, there is no good reason to believe that the core is unsound.

Why is the universe "necessarily" infinite in space and time ? What's your argument against the very concept of a finite but unbounded universe ? Also, why muddy the waters by reference to "Big Government" & "Big Business" ? The major scientific theories currently accepted were developed before either



of these bogeymen got involved. It's sad but true that further developments in the investigation of the very large or very small can only be made with the expenditure of vast amounts of cash, which must come from one or other of these sources. That's just the way things are.

Maybe like you, I'm disappointed over the frequency with which Galileo is wheeled out to prove the victory of forward-looking science over backward-looking theology. However, despite support for your cause from no less a philosopher (and atheist) than Bertrand Russell, which I'll quote immediately, I feel uneasy about your argument.

The quote from Bertrand Russell is from his *ABC of Relativity* (George Allen & Unwin, 3rd edition 1968; 1st edition 1925). On p. 13 he states :-

... it is interesting to contrast Einstein and Copernicus. Before Copernicus, people thought that the earth stood still and the heavens revolved about it once a day. Copernicus taught that 'really' the earth rotates once a day, and the daily revolution of sun and stars is only 'apparent'. Galileo and Newton endorsed this view, and many things were thought to prove it - for example, the flattening of the earth at the poles, and the fact that bodies are heavier there than at the equator. But in the modern theory, the question between Copernicus and his predecessors is merely one of convenience; all motion is relative, and there is no difference between the two statements: 'the earth rotates once a day' and 'the heavens revolve around the earth once a day'. The two mean exactly the same thing, just as it means the same thing if I say that a certain length is six feet or two yards. Astronomy is easier if we take the sun as fixed than if we take the earth, just as accounts are easier in decimal coinage. But to say more for Copernicus is to assume absolute motion, which is a fiction. All motion is relative, and it is a mere convention to take one body as at rest. All such conventions are equally legitimate, though not all are equally convenient.

I hate to say anything on this topic, because I'm bound to get things wrong, but I must say I'm uncomfortable with the great Russell's contention. Clearly, the measured universality of the speed of light forces us to abandon the Newtonian conceptions of absolute space and time. Absolute unaccelerated motion is a meaningless concept, so it makes no sense to ask whether some body is 'really' at rest. However, I didn't think the same applied to accelerated motion, which is just what orbital motion is. But then gravity comes in and complicates matters.

As everyone will be aware, the current model is that (approximately) the earth rotates daily on its axis, that the earth and sun rotate about their centre of mass (which happens to be within the sun) annually, the solar system is in motion (orbital and linear) relative to the centre (however defined) of our



galaxy, which is itself in relative motion compared to the local cluster of galaxies, which itself etc., and the whole of space is expanding (as judged by the cosmological red shift) whether as a result of a Big Bang or not.

So, taking any of these sub-systems as 'the centre' relative to which all other motion is to be measured is arbitrary. Hence, in classical mechanics, the widest possible frame of reference is taken as the stage on which the drama is played out. It is true that the equations of motion can be mathematically transformed from one frame to another, and darned complicated they become if we choose the wrong frame. There seems to be a working principle in science that, given the choice between theories equally supported by observation, elegant (ie. simple, economical) theories are to be preferred to complex ones, and that such theories, provided they work, really do tell us something about how things are.

Choosing the sun as the centre of the universe we now know to be wrong, but I would contend that it is less wrong than taking the earth to be such. The great advance that Newton made with his celestial mechanics was in demonstrating that the heavenly bodies obey the same laws of motion as terrestrial ones. This is not possible (I believe) if we take the earth as our fixed point.

So, what's Russell on about ? How does he explain the equatorial bulge ? Maybe he can explain it by the gravitational effect of the entire universe revolving about the earth. But then, how do we explain Mars' equatorial bulge (assuming it has one) ? The universe can't be revolving about Mars and about the earth, can it ? My problem is with his use of the term "equally legitimate". I'd say that all local frames of reference are to varying degrees illegitimate from an explanatory viewpoint, and of varying utility from a calculational viewpoint. Maybe he's trying to shock his readers out of their parochial perspectives. Or maybe I'm missing something deep. Please enlighten me.

Theo

14th July 1997

E. Ron Kermode

Response to C87

C87, p.28 : Like Rosemary I not infrequently find "real" philosophical contributions beyond me so will continue to pick holes, with no ill intent.

C87, pp.10-11 (health) : It is talking of "cost" (which has got itself an unjustified bad name) which bedevils discussion of health care. It is clearer if put in terms of reality which the selfish must then face up to. How many people do you think you are justified in condemning to a life of pain, leglessness or despair to save your own miserable hide ? Because that is what we are talking about if all the world's efforts (described for convenience as "money") is spent on health.



You are so right that fewer deaths AND LESS ILLNESS is what is needed, not mere cures but I'm afraid we will never get this while we gallop down the blind alley pulled by the runaways horses of the medical profession and the drug companies which aim to DEFEAT nature instead of working with her. That we CANNOT defeat nature is being shown by the bacteria which now use antibiotics as food and the utter failure of much of the "nuclear warfare" waged by the profession to impact on the statistics, many of the claimed successes being ascribable to other more natural things. Sorry if this is tending off into politics but it surely is the case that a complete change of PHILOSOPHY is called for both by people, to take responsibility and not "expect to be cured", and by the medical establishment to provide health for the people based on our own bodies, not a population of sick for the clever clinicians in the "National Medical Service" to show off their skills on !

C87, p.15 : having paid my whack, Rick, on the basis of the NHS (now replaced by a National Medical Service) I do consider I have a RIGHT to be treated. However I do agree there must be limits and we should have the honesty to face these but such is unlikely to be forthcoming and we shall muddle along with increasing unfairness and dissatisfaction.

C87, p.10 (abortion) : it isn't a fallacy, Theo, to say "would you do it" as we're not talking of a career, but even if we were some people would not work for an arms company; people engaged on weapon development have left either in moral disgust or psychologically damaged, &c. However, it seems obvious that anything we do should minimise pain and there seems no reason why foetuses should not be anaesthetised (even killed) just to be on the safe side, before being "torn apart". If they are not then this is a disgrace and perhaps the League Against Cruel Sports should be looking at a wicked deliberate torture rather than death in a form decided by nature.

My feelings are mixed. I cannot feel happy with abortions doled out lightly to the irresponsible but as until birth it is part of the mother it is hard to see why she should not control her own body. Further, how many of those opposed to abortion regardless of reasons for it have themselves been in the desperate position women find themselves in for no fault of their own ? It seems very much a "holier than thou" campaign picking on a minority which will not include them or theirs.

C87, p.8 (euthanasia) : I do wish people would stop writing "euthanasia" when talking about VOLUNTARY euthanasia. It is a form of dishonesty which hopes that thoughts of the Nazis will bring support to their side. I am a member of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Scotland and hope that should I become non compos mentis I shall be spared the indignity and possible suffering of being kept alive for the protection of the medics' insurance company ! Too often now the emergency services CAN stop a progress toward a natural death from disease or accident and then the establishment "cannot" (= will not) withdraw the attention for fear of



repercussions from those still able to make their feelings known - and to hell with the repercussions on the wretch being attended to.

When suicide is not a crime it is insanely cruel to punish anyone who aids an intended suicide UNABLE through circumstances to obtain the means of death, whether this inability is due to controls on drugs or physical disablement.

C87, p. 11 (intelligence) : The reason, Alan, that IQ tests and debate don't correlate is because IQ tests don't test intelligence! They test intellect - the ability to solve problems. This is recognised as a very important attribute for society as is seen by the desperate attempt to extend the term to mere skills, like music, sport, surgery, (or accountancy of course !). Like car driving we do not wish to admit we are no good at it though we will admit to being useless at this that and the other (no - better not include "the other" as some would rather admit stupidity than poor performance !).

I suggest that "intelligence tests" test not intelligence but "intellect", which I define as "ability to solve problems". Intelligence also determines how, when and even if a problem should be solved. I ask you to envisage Bobby Fischer, as a hostage of Idi Amin, challenged to play chess. However intellectually superior Bobby might be it would be of little use without the intelligence to decide how to play in such a way as to avoid becoming the contents of Idi's fridge !

As a problem that "doesn't need solving" I give you gas barbecues. Barbecues are not simply "eating al fresco". Why do we like them ? I suggest it is the atavistic urge to play with fire. So "gas barbecues" are nonsense. Nothing wrong with cooking by gas, at a camp site etc. (though I see no point in doing so in one's own garden) but it does not give the primitive satisfaction of "fire cooking". Then people who have suffered the inconvenience of outdoor eating without that benefit wonder why there is "something lacking" in what should have been a fun thing.

C87, p. 14 (education) : Surely what is now needed is to recognise that we cannot afford technical and administrative professionals who don't speak the same language and tertiary education should ensure a liberal grounding for any technical profession. Expensive maybe but I suggest it would pay off in time. The immediate answer of course has already been suggested and ignored by the tunnel visioned - that is free tertiary education recovered by income tax when earnings start. This could mean no one priced out of the university and eventually the whole cost could be off the government's back, the graduates not "feeling" the tax, as it would not "come out of" their earnings but only slow down their rate of increase. We could end up once more as the envy of the world.

C87, p. 14 (population) : I'm surprised at the statement that we have "no idea" how many people have ever lived. As an accountant who frequently had to assess a yard full of coal or a warehouse full of higgley piggley sacks



and arrive at an answer within 30% (usually much less) of the stated stock this would not seem insuperable unless one has to assume a developed world wiped out by the "Flood".

C87, p.15 (Ireland) : This will never be settled until the philosophy of "what we have we hold" is abandoned by the U.K. and the IRA's bluff is called and the loyalists give up a token amount of guns and say "what do you now offer?". The confusion of the rights of people to live in their birthplace (never, be it noted, possessed by children born to expats in Hong Kong) and the territorial "rights" of governments (which has no moral basis) prevents the one sensible solution - eventual withdrawal from Ireland after the rights of all those there now have been protected.

C87, p.18, para 5 (time travel) : Isn't the one year of two yours compensated for by the year after earlier death.

Finally, can everyone please put REFERENCES to each of their comments (issue and page - if appropriate paragraph). This takes the ONE writer a few minutes as they write - it saves EVERYONE many minutes, maybe hours, of hunting for what they are writing about.

E. Ron Kermode

Ron : Thanks for the contribution - just a few brief comments and questions. Firstly, is the foetus really just part of the mother's body and aren't many women anti-abortionists ? Incidentally, I've never understood the logic (though I can understand the emotion) behind allowing abortion in case of rape while disallowing it in most other cases. The primary anti-abortion case is based on the status of the foetus. OK; we shouldn't force the reluctant mother to raise the child, but if abortion is "murder" it is so however the pregnancy came about. Secondly, why is music a 'mere skill' ? I have Mozart down on my list of all-time greatest geniuses. Thirdly, just how are the rights of all in Northern Ireland to be protected after the withdrawal of troops? Finally, I thought I'd dealt with the doppelganger issue in time travel last time round. See also Rick Street's contribution in this issue.

Theo

14th July 1997

Michael Nisbet

COMMENTS ON C87

Dear Theo,

Thank you for your kind remarks about my contribution (**C87, p. 7**).



You query the accuracy of my contention that religion is defined by "subject as prior" while science treats "object as prior". You say that "most religions tend to have God as their object, and are based on relationships, while quantum mechanics is very much caught up with the relation between observer and observed".

Of course you are right in your observations. However, my argument (on the one hand) is that God, even though regarded as an object of aspiration or worship, is conceived of as a subject: that is, as some sort of supernal self who through his/her/its volition brought the universe into being. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth". Some religious or mystical beliefs go so far as to identify the essential self of each individual with the Godhead: "This my Self within my heart, this is Brahma; to Him shall I win when I go hence." (Chandogya Upanishad, translated by Max Muller, quoted in 'The Wisdom of the Hindus' ed. Brian Brown, London 1922). Thus a 'self' is in the religious conception prior to everything.

On the other hand, I would say that quantum mechanics represents a relatively recent development in the history of science, and shows science admitting to the difficulty of severing subject from object in any clearly defined way. Surely it is difficult to deny that the establishment of objectively verifiable principles is the commonly understood task of science ? To that extent, science regards the object as the prior term.

As for religion being "based on relationships" I see this as being its basic function. Its task is a moral one: to create coherence among persons by offering a transcendent focus for each individual's subjective sense of self.

The contention underlying my earlier contribution is that 'nature' operates in terms of continua - a matrix of relationships - while human verbal thought functions in terms of category. The attempt to understand the former in terms of the latter is intrinsically problematic.

You may have noticed what might amount to a slight logical inconsistency in Philip Lloyd Lewis' remarks on **C87, p. 20**. He writes "all delusions are beliefs but not all beliefs are delusions". So the category 'delusions' is a subset (if I am using logical terminology correctly) of the set of all beliefs. But he then goes on to say that "one man's belief is another man's delusion", which seems to imply that beliefs and delusions are interchangeable terms both relating to the same set. However, a belief is only established as delusory when compared with a state of affairs designated 'actual'. Furthermore, the actual, or factual, exists in contradistinction to the delusory and vice versa. Whether a belief is delusory is something that can be tested against fact, but the fact can only be established by being so tested.

Consider the following :-

1. Let us posit two different types of truth value, designated 0/1 and



2. A fact is that which is the case -1- as distinct from that which is not the case: 0.
3. Beliefs or statements about fact, however, can be assigned a + or - value (true or false) in so far as they accord with some specific fact of value 1,
4. However, 1/0 can only be established in relation to + or - and vice versa. Thus the two types of truth value are mutually dependent: one would not exist without the other. Neither is prior. Difficulties only arise in considering either to have some value independent of the other.

This relates to the "how do I know that I'm not a bat dreaming that it's a human being" type of controversy. A possible response is "There are so many such possibilities it is highly unlikely that any one of them will be the case". I would add that the state designated 'dreaming' only exists in contradistinction to the state designated 'waking' and vice versa. 'Objective' and 'subjective' describe the quality of our relation to something, not some quality that a perception 'has' intrinsically. It is not that there is a prior state called 'dreaming' that someone comes along and identifies and names without reference to anything else. If it were entirely consistent and persistent it would be a waking state. The one does not exist without reference to the other, but the category promotes the illusion that what it designates exists as a discrete entity. To say that I am a bat dreaming is unmeaning unless I have some experience of waking up as a bat.

Beyond all this categorisation, to quote Michael Frayn again, "The complexity of the universe is beyond expression in any possible notation". Yet categorise it we must, if we are to function as self-conscious entities, a privilege that is dearly bought: at the price of the knowledge of death.

Michael Nisbet

P.S. A suggested thought experiment in connection with the vexed question of time: Suppose that absolutely everything in the universe stopped: that no object moved in relation to any other object, and that all emissions of energy were frozen (a state of 'absolute zero'?) and then that everything started up again. Would it be meaningful to say that an interval of time had passed between the one event and the other? It seems to me that only if a clock existed somewhere outside the universe would time have any meaning in such circumstances; and that, since the universe means 'all existing things', would seem to be impossible. What existence does time have, in other words, beyond the movements of things in relation to one another?

Michael : I don't altogether disagree with you on your science vs religion views; I just don't think it's as cut and dried as you make out. There's a lot written these days by religious scientists (eg. John Polkinghorne) on how science and theology are both asking questions about how things are as they



are. With respect to truth values, it is easier to establish beliefs than facts - so I'm not sure of the utility of your programme in the context we're discussing. You'd have to explain how the inter-dependency works. Finally, what you have to say about time is interesting : classically, you're distinguishing between the Relational and Substantival theories of time. There's a dialogue on the distinction in the book I referred to last time (*Time, Change and Freedom - an introduction to metaphysics* by Quentin Smith and L. Nathan Oaklander). Like you, I think I go along with the Relational theory.

Theo

19th July 1997

Rick Street

RESPONSE TO C87

Theo Todman (C87, pp. 17-19)

Point taken about not adequately crediting my opponents with valid insight. I am inclined to err on the side of antagonism in otherwise civilised debates, I know. I trust however that my comments will not be taken personally and will help to fire up a little enthusiasm in other members. But I do apologise if I offended anyone.

My opening remarks last time about immortality were not intended to in any way devalue the humour of the New Scientist quote. I did say that I did like the idea, did I not? My point was a separate one concerning the validity of population projections back into pre-history, which was merely inspired by the 33% calculation. And my use of the term immortality was merely a continuation of the nonsensicality of the joke. Obviously I don't think everyone currently alive is really immortal.

Ah ! I didn't realise Jennifer Sprague is the Christian Forum SIG Sec ! In retrospect it does seem rather ridiculous of me to accuse her of mis-quoting the Bible when I don't know the quote myself. Whoops ! Allow me to try to "get out of this one".

Although I don't know the Bible inside out I do know bits of it and in my experience the bits of it I do know are almost always misquoted. The most extreme example of this was a family on an American talk show who claimed that slaughtering Jews was what Jesus wanted and gave a reference that allegedly supported this claim. I looked it up and it merely referred to two individual people who happened to be Jewish who were guilty of some sin or other and Jesus was warning them that God would punish them for those sins. However taken out of context that one paragraph did appear to justify the holocaust. Not that this has anything to do with Jennifer, but it does illustrate just how mis-quotable the Bible is.



I do not think of myself as a Christian as such but I do have a lot of respect for the teachings of the New Testament. They may not tally with the Old Testament at all but what little I have read does seem fairly cohesive and ideologically sound. Jennifer's assertion that sinners get rewarded with large slices of cake still strikes me as going against the spirit of Christian ideology. My conclusion therefore had to be that her argument was based on yet another misquote. However I will check out those references that you kindly provided.

All electromagnetic radiation is made up of photons, not just visible light. If photons can't travel through any metal then why does lead give more protection against X-rays and Gamma rays than say aluminium? I don't think this was just any metal or just any photons but an experiment done under very specific circumstances, and no, it definitely wasn't Cherenkov radiation and I'm fairly sure he reckoned these photons were going faster than c!

Y'know ... you're right! Even after you died there would not be a "you shaped gap" even though you'd die one year earlier than you should've done because your corpse would contain as much energy as your body. If time travel is possible and the Law Of Conservation Of Energy continues to hold true then we must conclude that the amount of energy expended in the journey back in time must equal the amount of energy contained in the matter that is sent back ... I think !

However another point occurs to me. The law in question states that "Energy cannot be created or destroyed only transformed from one type to another" and these processes of creation, destruction or transformation are processes which happen over time. Therefore the law cannot be extended to encompass time travel by viewing the entire space-time continuum as the same closed system that the law assumes for present space. If you imagine the continuum objectively, outside of time, then it becomes a static object because motion requires time which is already represented as a physical dimension...?... does that make any sense at all ?

Its interesting that your argument for not torturing animals is based on the likely attitude of a hypothetical alien race towards us humans. Your argument against my point actually substantiates it. The only rational argument there is for being nice to animals is the long term effects on us. You also bring up the subject of sympathy. Sympathy is an emotional reaction not a rational one. It is because the boundaries of our own society are not clearly defined that there is a graduated scale of who and what we have sympathy with. The more like us something is the easier it is to sympathise with it. I for example have no sympathy for bacteria which my immune systems is busily annihilating even as I write this, but I do have sympathy for my fellow man. This overflows its usefulness by also covering certain human-like animals but this is not rationally justifiable. Morality is the rational justification of our instinctive sympathetic responses which exist so that we can function as social animals.



In answer to your implied question, no, I don't torture animals because I do sympathise with creatures other than humans. However, I can't rationally justify this behaviour so I don't denounce those who do. It is not for me to judge their behaviour unless it is detrimental to society, in which case I have a moral responsibility to intervene if I can.

And Now For The Rest Of Ya

Michael Nisbet (C87, p. 5) : The ability to recognise ourselves in mirrors is not a measure of self-awareness but merely a measure of the understanding of reflective surfaces. I have no doubt that cats are aware of their own existence but they may well lack the deductive reasoning to conclude what the mirror does just by observing the way the movements of the image match their own. I believe that all animals are aware of their own existence therefore the term "self-aware" in its conventional usage is somewhat pointless. I view self-aware creatures as being those that are aware of their own actions and the implications of their actions to other individuals.

In spite of my disagreement with the foundational point of your argument I have to say that the rest was quite excellent. I am inclined to view science as "just another religion" but have to admit that your theory that religion is subject based whereas science is object based is a valid dividing line between the two credos.

As for your observation that the distinction between me and the world around me is not clear cut I do agree with you but would suggest a dividing line of physicality. "I" am mental, spiritual. I am what I know, think, feel, believe, etc. The world around me is physical, substantial, comprised of matter and energy. My body is not me but just a part of the physical world that I am particularly connected with. But that is just my personal view and probably not one that professional sportsmen would agree with.

Anthony Owens (C87, p. 8) : So you're anti-abortion then are you ? Just checking ! Abortion is an interesting issue because one camp sees it as murder whilst the other sees it as a medical procedure. In the history of differences of opinion they don't really come more different than that. I am undecided and am glad that I don't need to have an opinion on the subject but I find it interesting that opinion can be so hugely divided on any subject. What it boils down to is that no-one actually knows whether a foetus is a person or not. Both camps are just guessing. However this doesn't help people who are faced with having to make the decision, be they pregnant women, doctors, or politicians. I can only suggest that the people concerned be allowed to make the decisions for themselves. However the anti-abortionist can then argue that the people who it involves most are the foetuses themselves and their interests need to be represented in the decision making process. It seems unsolvable! There's a challenge for you if ever there was.



Theo (C87, p. 10) : You say that it must be the case that peoples lives are routinely not saved although the technology exists because we can't afford it. but couldn't it also be said that if the technology is so expensive that it can't ever be used that it in fact doesn't exist at all except in theory? This may sound picky but if I was terminally ill I'd rather understand the situation as being that there is no possible cure than that there is a cure but the health service is too stingy to cough up the cash.

And concerning Anthony's theme of furniture motifs for mag titles does anyone know the Latin for "Hatstand"?

Now that I've wandered off philosophical topics and onto such mundane issues as mag titles, and since I'm picking on the Ed at the moment I'll take this opportunity to rewind to Theo's opening editorial regarding why the SIG exists and the issue of quality control.

Personally I don't like the idea of editorial censorship one bit because this newsletter is supposed to be about discussion. If one person decides what is a good argument and what is a bad argument then the only opinions that get printed will be those of the editor and one person's views don't constitute a discussion. However I can see the need for some discouragement of contributions that aren't appropriate to the SIG - for instance, if someone just sent in a shopping list, no one would want to read it. The answer I think is to agree certain ground rules about what should be submitted and here are a few suggestions for readers to argue over.

- 1) No using words that aren't in the Concise Oxford Dictionary.
Most readers probably don't have PhDs, so will get lost if they can't at least look up any technical terminology.
- 2) No using scientific or mathematical formulae without explaining the relevance of the various letters involved.
Assume the reader has 0-level maths but nothing more.
- 3) No referring to the opinions of published writers, however famous you may think they are, without naming associated reading material.

These ground rules would protect the interests of non-experts because I myself am just that. Experts may wish to suggest other ground rules to protect their own interests but I leave that to them.

Coming back to the idea of what the SIG is for ... well ... its called the Philosophical Discussion SIG so obviously it must be for discussing philosophy but that does beg the question What Is Philosophy? I feel I instinctively know but it's not easy to put into words. I thought about it for awhile then looked it up in the dictionary. The dictionary definition was longer but more vague than my own but it seemed essentially the same in spirit so I don't think I was far off but I would be interested to know how a doctor of philosophy would put it. For what its worth my definition is simply



"The holistic study of everything" as opposed to the various sciences which break reality down into convenient little chunks.

Alan Carr (C87, p. 11) : Hmm... all sounds very Buddhist to me! What amazes me is that anyone thinks IQ tests should be representative of overall intelligence at all. Intelligence is comprised of many, probably hundreds, of separate factors of which IQ is but one. Personally I doubt that intelligence is actually quantifiable at all.

Philip Lloyd Lewis vs Theo Todman (C87, pp. 19-24) : Go Phil, Go Phil, Go Phil!

Roger Farnworth : Hmm! ... "there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of the past or the future at the same time as the present" ... errr ... well, no there wouldn't be, would there, because the whole point of the past and the future is that they exist at a DIFFERENT time to the present. If you transpose your argument from the dimension of time into the dimension of space then what you're saying is that my house doesn't exist because its not in the same place as your house. When dealing with time these things are more difficult to visualise because of the linear way in which we move through the continuum; however there's no getting away from the fact that the past existed and the future will exist. We have as much evidence of this as we have of our own existence in the present moment, namely our own personal experience. I can remember the past, I can see evidence of it in front of me and I'm constantly aware of the fact that I am moving into the future. If I throw a ball into the air, I know that it will fall back to earth, not the same instant that I throw it, but in the future. You know these things too so how can you argue that the past didn't exist and the future will never happen? Saying that they DON'T exist is only true because of the tense you're using for the verb of the sentence.

John Neary (C87, p. 26-27) : Hate to break it to ya but post-mortem survival is not universally believed in and therefore even by your own standards (which like Theo I don't agree with) open to debate.

As for the nature of post-mortem survival we have a wealth of evidence from ghosts, seances, and hypnotic regression to sift through. Personally I think that the evidence of hypnotic regressions has now disproved the church's view but not necessarily the Christian one. I've heard it said that early Christians did believe in reincarnation so it seems to me that even the church is guilty of misquoting the Bible. Either that or the Bible is wrong, which I'm not going to suggest without first being very sure of my argument. However reincarnation isn't the whole story because it doesn't explain ghosts and seances. There must also be some type of spiritual plane of existence where the spirit resides between incarnations. Question is does the spirit also reside there during incarnations? Are our bodies just being remotely controlled from some other place where our spirits actually exist? Or does the mind download itself into the brain? As I see it the argument that the



mind is merely a product of the brain no longer holds water. This theory cannot explain hypnotic regression, or ghosts, or seances.

And one final point, I wouldn't worry about re-incarnating as an oyster if I was you because I'm sure oysters enjoy themselves as much as we do in their own inimitable way.

Rosemary Clarke (C87, p. 28) : At the risk of performing my own misquotation I direct you to Matthew 7:20 "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them". I consider that Jesus did actually want people to view evidence as relevant to proper understanding. I don't think he did require blind faith at all.

And Finally ... Theo (C87, P. 17) : While I've got me Bibble oot ... Matt 19:30 is about humility - the first (ie. the rich and powerful) will be last (in God's good books) because humility is a virtue and amassing wealth is a sin. Matt 20:16 seems to be saying that different individuals are judged on different scales so you shouldn't compare your own actions with those of others but instead constantly seek to improve your own behaviour. Those who appear to be first may in fact be last because they had a head-start and this is taken into account in the final reckoning. Mark 9:35 is another reference to humility, this time focusing on megalomania rather than wealth as a sin. He who places himself first among his fellows is placing himself last in the eyes of God. And Luke 13:30 is a little ambiguous but probably refers to racial pride. The Jews (in this case) should not assume that they will be first to enter heaven because of the covenant with God, but must earn their place by the purity of their thoughts and actions. Complacency about being first will indirectly result in you actually being last. All of which I find entirely acceptable and contrary to Jennifer's hypothesis. (Smug mode) ... As I said, the Bible is perfectly good but nearly always misquoted !

Rick Street

Rick : I agree with you that the Bible is often misquoted, sometimes outrageously so. I don't recognise the passage you quote at the beginning of your contribution - it sounds a bit like the Ananias & Sapphira passage in Acts 5:1-11, but in that case Peter would feature rather than Jesus. As this is a philosophical discussion group, I don't think we should take the discussion of the particular passages you've checked out any further. Enough to say that Biblical interpretation is a complicated business, involving not only the local context, but the wider one. This itself depends on how one views the Bible - whether as one book, two books or many books; whether it is all of a piece or can contradict itself; etc. You'll be aware of the serious disagreements there have been over the centuries, and that not all of these have been caused by sticking a pin in the Bible & (mis-)applying whatever comes up to your own situation. But, enough of all this, except to say that it is not orthodox Christian doctrine to suggest that God rewards sinners for sinning or for being sinners.



All are sinners, but some admit it and some don't. Those who admit it and take the remedy are "saved" and those who don't, aren't. Or so the story goes.

You're quite right about photons passing through metals. Even visible light finds its way through gold leaf, I understand. Don't know what I was thinking about. Apologies ! There's an article by Marcus Chown in this week's New Scientist (6th September) that discusses the possibilities of faster than light travel. No mention of your photons, however. Photons always travel in vacuo at c, though presumably in matter they bounce around a bit, get absorbed & re-emitted, deflected & what have you; which slows them down somewhat. The issue is that nothing can be accelerated to the speed of light. It is theoretically possible for tachyons to exist, which cannot be slowed down to the speed of light.

My argument on appeals to alien empathy was to demonstrate consistency (a primary element in moral theory involving reciprocity or categorical imperatives). It was not intended to demonstrate that empathy was based on self-interest. If treating the infliction of flagrantly unnecessary suffering on sentient non-human beings as morally obnoxious is not rationally justifiable, what does a rational moral justification look like ? Contra what you say to Michael Nisbet, we have no evidence to suggest that bacteria are sentient, so they're irrelevant to the discussion. In any case "self defence" is a mitigating circumstance.

Interestingly, there's a question in this week's NS as follows : "When an animal looks in a mirror does it realise it is looking at itself ? Which, if any, animals successfully make this connection ?". I'll keep you posted on the response ! Incidentally, do young children "understand reflective surfaces" when they recognise themselves in a mirror ?

Bah ! Science may be treated as "just another religion" - Mary Midgely has written a lot on this : *Evolution as a Religion* and *Science as Salvation* are two of her books. She is, of course, against this extension. In itself, science is no more (and no less) than a particularly successful method of investigating the natural world.

Not all would agree with you in your adoption of mental / physical dualism.

Well, there's much more in your contribution to stimulate discussion, but I'll leave these juicy morsels to our readers.

Theo

24th July 1997

Rosemary Clarke

RESPONSE TO THEO TODMAN (C87)



Dear Theo,

You said (**C87, p. 28**) "Faith doesn't entitle us to believe what we like". O.K. So you need evidence on which to base your beliefs, but what do you count as evidence? As well as 'facts' other people tell us, which may be faulty anyway (history teaches us that), we all have our own instincts, characters, experiences and interpretations to guide us, and these vary from person to person. I am very glad we do not have to prove everything before we can believe anything, or we would be sadly lacking in faith in anything or anyone !

If we have no other rights at all, I firmly believe people are entitled to their own beliefs.

Rosemary Clarke

Rosemary : good to see we haven't frightened you off yet ! With respect to your last point, I think we should make a distinction between having the legal right to believe what we like and being rational or justified in our beliefs. There is then a further distinction between being allowed (legally or morally) to hold a set of beliefs and being allowed to act on them. My use of the term "entitled" was in the sense of being justified in holding a particular belief. I had not intended that we institute Orwell's Thought Police !

My prejudices on a just State's approach to the freedom of belief are that it should allow its members (and others, where it has power or influence over them) to hold whatever beliefs they like, though it may limit their expression. It may constrain its citizens to respect others' beliefs, where these are sincerely held, and may forbid their ridicule. It should not force them to accept others' beliefs nor forbid them to attempt to refute these beliefs.

Theo

24th July 1997

Anthony Owens

REPLIES TO C87

To the Editorial (C87, pp. 2-4) : Despite having the proven wisdom to join the ultra-exclusive 0.2% of Mensa members who like to put their brains to good purpose, P.D.G. members are bound to flog the seemingly dead horse occasionally. Nevertheless, the more one travels a familiar road the more detail one notices along it. Is it up to those who have learned more to correct those who have learned less, and, by doing so, possibly enlarge their own understanding? Academics who expect fore-lock tugging betray a self-doubt and immaturity which would be unlikely to be helpful.



To Theo Todman (C87, p. 11; on consciousness) : Briefly, the point sources of consciousness are us, for which my only evidence is me; but then is not everything within our experience subjective? I grant that 'points' is an imperfect word for the purpose because consciousness develops into relationships, as in Michael Nisbet's quote from Aleister Crowley. Thus in a sense all can say, "I am the Universe", yet all are limited by each having a unique informative view of it as if each was a point within it. I would humbly suggest that as a 'port' based upon a visible land mass of reason it offers a course more prudent than drifting aimlessly while arguing about which way up the charts are !

To Theo Todman (C87, p. 10; on abortion) : Supporting, being '*glad of*', or just acquiescing in, someone else doing something we would not be '*happy*' doing makes hypocrites of us all. I was merely inviting supporters of abortion who would shy from the task of carrying it out to face their hypocrisy.

To Roger Farnworth (C87, pp. 24-25) : Regarding my light-hearted look at the problems of time in C86 I fear I may have misled Roger into misrepresenting me. The 'metal bar' stands in for the non-locality of the photon or particle. Also, I did say that the 'timeless photon' seemed to be 'linked' with 'action at a distance' but the 'different viewpoints' I referred to are those of the viewers and the photon, which detail I felt sufficiently in the field of general knowledge for the reader to provide, which Roger generously does. Also, I trust Roger realises he is effectively accusing me of saying that space-time consists of time and space; 'co-habit' being what past, present, and future do via the added dimension. Roger could do worse than read the Alastair Rae book I mentioned in C85, with particular reference to what has become known as the Aspect / Bell experiment. Written by a scientist who can communicate, it is brief, to the point, and free of the interminable waffle so beloved of the frustrated novelists who pass for scientific journalists, and who could make an account of changing a light bulb run to three hundred pages. Perhaps we just have to accept that time is a subjective phenomenon: is that problem enough ?

To Michael Nisbet (C87, pp. 5-7) : Michael starts from the position that gods and spirits were invented to fill the role of that which must be responsible for those events for which our ancestors could find no other explanation. This is a common and perfectly valid guess, but, as Michael acknowledges in his ordering of events, it is dependent on self-awareness and this is perhaps too simply dismissed as just '*emergent*'. Unfortunately, to get beyond this idea of an emergent property empirically seems to be impossible in principle. It may be reasonable to assume that individuals similar to ourselves possess it but how do we look for its source ? Isolating or removing bits of their brain to the point whereat they no longer claim it or seem to possess it would be pointless. Such observations could only lead to a similar position as a claim that flies see with their wings because although they always fly away when you approach them they fail to do so when their wings are removed ! Thus it may seem that in the matter of selfhood and the possibility of a Supreme



Self science must forever be silent. Can science be versus what it cannot talk about ?

To Theo's reply to Philip Lloyd Lewis (C87, p. 21) : Regarding Pythagoras' theorem, does your necessary qualification of '*in Euclidean geometry*', render the apparent proof subjective ? Must the nature of space and its measurement always be open to revision so that every theorem will always be dependent on special conditions imposed by us, and does this plus the fact that mathematics can never be complete mean that the whole of mathematics and perhaps all axiomatic systems will always be subjective ?

To Philip Lloyd Lewis (C87, p. 20) : Is the statement, 'Something is happening', subjective or objective ? If subjective then we may only be thinking that something is happening, but in that case the process of thinking is happening, which either leads to a *reductio ad absurdum* or a contradiction.

Anthony Owens

Anthony : with reference to ports in storms, there are other explanations on consciousness to that you espouse. If you subscribe to JCS-Online, you can get three long e-mails a day from various researchers debating the subject. I don't have time to read mine any more !

There's something fishy about your objections to the correlation between incremental brain lesions and reduction in conscious experience demonstrating that conscious experience is brain-related. There are loads of post hoc propter hoc fallacies, and your sight / wings example is a good one. However, scientific experiments are designed to eliminate coincidental non-causality. Theories are usually backed up with some explanation of how the causation takes place - a model of what's going on. The study of pathological cases, PET scans, etc. has demonstrated the close correlation between brain events and conscious events. The study of the structure of the brain leads us to expect that consciousness must arise in it somehow. More so, at any rate, than sight in wings.

Your remark about Pythagoras' Theorem raises an interesting point about the nature of mathematics and about theorems within deductive systems. A theorem is simply a true statement within a mathematical system. It can be arrived at subjectively, idiosyncratically, intuitively or logically - the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan believed that he received some of his theorems in number theory from the Hindu goddess Namagiri. In this he was presumably mistaken, especially since a few of his theorems on prime numbers turned out to be wrong. He simply had a very strong intuitive grasp of the subject. However, theorems still have to be proved; that is, the proof has to be written up, by means of a mechanical application of the rules of inference to the axioms. This is why very difficult proofs, such as Wiles' proof



of Fermat's Last Theorem which runs to over 100 pages, become less certain as their length increases.

This said, if the axioms are changed, certain theorems that were true become false, and vice versa. In non-Euclidean geometries, one of Euclid's 10 axioms, the *parallel postulate* ("through a given point P not on a line L, there is only one line in the plane of P and L that does not meet L") is denied. This is equivalent to changing the rules of the game, but has nothing to do with subjectivity. The rules of ball games are not subjective because in soccer only the goalkeeper is allowed to handle the ball while in rugby all players can. The rules of one game are intended to be objective, and all players must appear to the referee to abide by them. Similarly, Euclidean geometry is a different game to non-Euclidean geometries.

On the other hand, what, if any, mathematical system or systems happen to best describe the physical universe is a matter for observation & experiment. It appears that space is non-Euclidean, but this has nothing to do with theorems in Euclidean geometry being valid or invalid. Indeed, there is an important philosophical difference between validity and truth, though this must wait for another occasion.

Theo

25th July 1997

Anthony Owens

CRIME PREVENTION

Few could regard our present criminal justice system as anything other than a farce: jails equipped with gymnasiums so that some violent mugger will find it even easier to beat you up next time; free association between prisoners so that the ambitious career criminal can make the right contacts or organise the next riot; prisons wherein drugs are incredibly even more readily available than on the street; a prison regime in general which only the one-off criminal who wouldn't do it again anyway is likely to find unpleasant; and, of course, sentences which are mainly a public relations exercise and bear little relationship to any actual period of detention.

The whole system even starts with basic unfairness. Apart from the obvious, such as when protecting your own property can bring heavier penalties than stealing somebody else's, the penalties for committing an actual crime owe more to blind chance than logic. Not only can different judges pass different sentences for identical crimes but the chance outcomes of the same basic crimes can result in very different treatments. A push while stealing someone's bag can result in anything from hurt pride to death but does the outcome make it a different crime?

I would like to propose a system which I suggest to be fair, simple, relatively inexpensive, sufficiently humane to be applied to juveniles, and of



considerable assistance in improving detection rates. Firstly, it recognises just two offences: theft, (depriving another of the use or enjoyment of anything to which they have a legally defined right); and violence, (causing, threatening, or risking injury to another without their consent, except in cases where the other was committing an offence). Theft counts as one offence; violence as two. All penalties rely on the basis of a surgically implanted tracking device enabling offenders to be monitored automatically by satellite, yet continue with their lives, and thus have a far better chance of recovery than at present. Penalties increase in an orderly fashion according to the running total of the number of offences committed. Sentences would be in two parts: firstly imposing a limited range of travel (say from fifty miles to fifty yards); secondly setting the period of monitoring (say from one year to life). Breaching the limits or interfering with the device would be an offence counting as one.

I believe this system to be sufficiently lenient as to allow for intolerance of multiple recidivism. I therefore propose a final sanction of death on anyone recording a score of, say five, as a necessary public safeguard and one which ought not to encourage murder because of the virtual inevitability of being caught.

Anthony Owens

Anthony : I'm not sure chance plays as much of a role in crime as you suggest, or at least not in the direction you suggest. Pushing a 90-year-old over in order to steal her handbag may not result in serious injury, in which case the criminal has got away with a potentially violent crime. If it does result in injury, he deserves the sentence for GBH as serious injury could have been anticipated as the likely outcome. Saying "boo !" to a 20-year-old who, unbeknown to you, has a heart condition and dies of a heart attack, should not result in a conviction for manslaughter as the outcome could not have been fairly anticipated.

You must be joking concerning the "red card = black cap" suggestion ! I presume you would be happy executing a kleptomaniac ? I'd anticipate those with 4 points resisting arrest with a degree of vigour. Are there really only two categories of crime ?

Theo



29th July 1997**Alan Carr****THE SCIENCE vs RELIGION QUESTION (C87, pp. 5-7)**

Being a thinker about "the science and religion question" I was interested in all that was said in this journal and other media, but I feel the real issue has been sidelined. Although this question has taken various forms (ie. Universe, man, atom etc.) I believe man should form the beginning of the search for this answer.

If we were to attach their theories to man the result might appear like this: science asks what is man made of ? Religion asks what made man ? It could be said that science tries to deny the soul and religion the body (what I am trying to say is that there is as much information about the soul in scientific texts as there is in religious texts about the body).

If we were to use the sexual orgasm as an example, science could only explain it in absence of soul and religion in absence of the body, although certain religions have accused people who have orgasms as only using sex for pleasure.

All this said, it is possible that in the human brain/mind there are centres for both sets of ideals, science occupying logic/mental aspects and religion occupying higher emotional and aspirational aspects. Is the science vs religion question one that should be aligned psychologically by oneself, rather than the potentially endless group debate where people air their views externally to other people, attempting to score points rather than realising that both sets of ideals can be aligned in to one philosophy !

.... or maybe not !

Alan Carr

PS. Theo : was I the only one to enter the competition ? Well !

1st August 1997**Alan Carr****FURTHER THOUGHTS ON C87**

Reply to rejection (C87, pp. 2-3; editorial) : "thanks for your Commensals, I don't reckon I'll be joining you. The standard is as low as it always was. Contributors seem to have no feel for philosophy at all. Sorry". I feel I have to comment. I suppose everybody else will as well, so I'll keep it short. He doesn't want to join; no problem. "The standard is low" : he does have a point; was it always low ? I don't know. If it was, do we have a responsibility to raise it ? 'We don't seem to have a feel for philosophy at all' : some of what I have read would be considered debating as opposed to philosophy, and these endless replies would it be better if each article was read,



digested, learnt from, and then moved on from. I realise that some articles have to be replied to, but couldn't these be incorporated into articles extended beyond the original point ?

C87, p. 13; The article about "Wittgenstein" : who is Wittgenstein ? It could have been explained in less than 20 words to accommodate those of us who are less learned. In any SIG there will be people of different levels of ability and knowledge, and each author of each article should acknowledge and accommodate this.

Whatever the intentions of our learned friend, it will almost certainly increase the standard of contributions, which might have been his motive in the first place in rejecting us. My suggestions might improve *Commensal* or they might not. It's better to regret something you did write rather than something you didn't write, and I'll close on this.

Alan Carr

1st August 1997

Alan Carr

EAST TIMOR

Now for something a bit more controversial: as it emerged on a previous *World in Action* program and a court case against four women "the ploughshare four", that the British arms industry with British Government backing has sold arms to the Indonesian Dictatorship, which have been used in atrocities against the people of East Timor. Does this put the British Government just a step above countries like Iran and Libya which have supplied arms to the IRA and other terrorist organisations ?

Well, I await the verbal assault !

Alan Carr

Alan : Thanks for these contributions. I'll leave the bulk of the response to others. With respect to Wittgenstein - he is probably the most famous philosopher of the 20th century, we are in a philosophical discussion group and this is Mensa ! This isn't really meant to sound snooty. OK, so you haven't heard of him - but we're all capable of looking things up. Still, it's a fair point to warn us not to force neophytes to do this too often.

If anyone wants a very brief, if unsympathetic and slightly humorous, introduction to Wittgenstein they can do worse than read Paul Strathern's *Wittgenstein in 90 Minutes* (Constable). About 60 pages and £2. There's a whole series of such books on philosophers from Plato to Sartre, eight of which I bought recently from my book club, though I have only read W so far.



A useful brief introduction to philosophy is Thomas Nagel's *What Does it all Mean?* (Oxford Paperbacks, 100 pages, £5).

Theo

29th July 1997

David Taylor

RESPONSE TO C86 & C87

1. **Regarding the Editorial (C87, pp. 2-4)** : I seem to remember dropping a couple of bricks in *Commensal* in the past due to rushing contributions and thinking afterwards, so in future I will try to think first !
2. **Regarding Jennifer Sprague (C86, pp. 7-8)** : I think that mushrooms may be "meant" to be eaten as well. The mushrooms are actually the fruiting part of a fungus, bearing the spores which are analogous to seeds. So your eating of mushrooms might serve to spread the fungus.

David Taylor

David : Welcome back to Commensal ! Don't worry too much about the bricks (as already noted, I dropped a couple last time and maybe more this time !).

Theo

